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SUPPORT IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS: IS IT BETTER TO ASSESS THE CONTENT OR THE TYPE OF RELATIONSHIPS?

Theo van Tilburg

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Theoretical concepts such as support are linked with the experiences of individual people. Operationalizing them involves translating the theoretical concept into empirical variables: questions, research items, and so on. Answers to a straightforward question about the degree of support in a relationship can serve as a direct indicator of the experience of being supported. However, because a single question is not a very reliable measure and because respondents can differ in their interpretation of "support," it is better to specify the set of features or components that can be discerned within the theoretical concept.

Early empirical studies have almost always based their operationalization of support on the characteristics associated with specific types of primary (or close – Weiss 1987) relationships. The label assigned to a relationship is generally used as the indicator of the relationship type. Relationship types are often related to the roles people fulfill as, for instance, parents, employees, or neighbors. Litwak and Szelenyi (1969) argue, for example, that the possibilities to provide support are determined by the characteristics of types of relationships. Thus, they suggest that family members are the key sources of aid requiring long-term commitment, e.g., prolonged care for a sick person. Neighbors can best perform tasks that require frequent contacts and geographical proximity, for instance, short-term help in emergencies. Friends fulfill tasks "which require the closest manifest agreement to be accomplished but involve relatively long-term involvement" (Litwak and Szelenyi 1969, p. 471; see also Cantor 1979; Litwak 1985).

Inherent to such an operationalization of support is the view that different types of primary relationships serve different functions, and that the various relationships should not be grouped together as close or supportive relationships. The supportive meaning of primary relationships is tied up with the role of the relationship, and there are logical and empirical linkages between the structural properties of a relationship, the type of a relationship, and the content of the relationship (e.g., kin living nearby can provide long-term care). Provided that this point of view is valid, and since questions about relationship type are relatively easy to administer in survey research and are relatively reliable (House and Kahn 1985), measures assessing relationship types are to be preferred over more complicated measures of the content of relationships.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the hypothesized association between the possibilities of providing support, on the one hand, and the label assigned to the primary relationship by the interviewee in everyday terms such as spouse, friend, or child, on the other hand, is common in research into primary relationships. Several recent studies in the Netherlands (for instance, De Jong-Gierveld 1987; Knipscheer 1980) have taken type of relationship as the starting point for operationalizing support, for instance, when the number of friends is used to explain the intensity of loneliness.

Research has revealed, however, that one can doubt whether the label assigned to a relationship is unambiguous with regard to the structural properties of the relationship *and* with regard to the positive, supportive content of the relationship. Findings from a study conducted by Fischer (1985) show that ties with kin outside the household tend to be geographically dispersed, so that the assumed possibilities of giving support can be doubted. Relationships in the household and relationships with a high frequency of contact are often characterized by negative aspects or even violence (Rook 1984; Strauss 1980). Further, the research findings of Fischer (1982) show that the content of the relationships called "friends" by the respondents varies greatly, and findings of Dykstra (1987) show that relationships other than friends are characterized by the same content aspects as the relationships with friends.

Therefore, it is hazardous to infer a priori the possibilities of relationships providing support from the label attached to relationships by the interviewee. An operationalization of support can better start from the subjective orientation (especially the affective aspects of this orientation) toward other members of a primary network in actual or potential activity (Bates and Babchuk 1961; Gottlieb 1985; Kahn 1979; van Tilburg 1985). The idea is that there is a common core in all types of primary relationships. As a consequence, the operationalization of support should start with an identification of the relevant aspects of the content of relationships, regardless of the type of relationships. Given this starting point, it is necessary to assess whether the various relevant aspects exist in each relationship. It is clear that the assessment of the content of several relationships demands lengthy questionnaires. Because of the costs of survey research involving such a design, it is necessary to determine whether such an effort is worthwhile or, in other words, to determine whether an operationalization of support based on relationship types is invalid.

The purpose of this article is to compare the type and content of primary relationships as indicators of support in relationships. If the relationship type is a valid indicator of support, then differences in support should vary systematically with differences in relationship type. The content of a relationship refers to the actual emotional and instrumental exchanges in the relationship and to the individual's expectations that these exchanges will be realized within the relationship. If the relationship content is a valid indicator of support, then differences in support should vary systematically with differences in relationship content. Furthermore, if the relationship type and the relationship content are valid indicators, both measures should be strongly associated with a straightforward measure of the intensity of support. In this chapter we want to examine these assumptions using results from an empirical survey. The leading question will be: Which operationalization of support

is adequate – the one based on the type of a relationship, or the one starting from the content of a relationship? The hypothesis to be rejected is: The assessment of relationship type is sufficient for the assessment of the intensity of the support in the relationship.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE SURVEY

Respondents

Respondents were 419 men and women, aged 20 years and over, who were interviewed in 1985/1986 on the extent, nature, and significance of their close relationships. Their names and addresses were obtained by taking a random sample, stratified according to sex and marital status, from the Population Registers of the Municipalities of Purmerend and Haarlemmermeer.

Purmerend, with more than 50,000 inhabitants, is a fast-growing town near Amsterdam. Respondents were drawn from three of the town's oldest districts and two newer districts. Haarlemmermeer is a large municipality in the western part of Holland. The municipality includes a number of various-sized villages. Sixteen of the smallest villages, with a median of about 600 inhabitants, were selected.

Questionnaire

The respondents were interviewed for an average of two and a half hours with the aid of a questionnaire composed of both open and pre-structured questions. The list included questions about demographic characteristics: living, working, and housing conditions; personality characteristics; social contacts; support; problematic situations; loneliness; and coping attitudes.

Identification of relationships. A network of close relationships was identified by means of two questions. First, respondents were asked to name persons with whom they had the most contact and with whom they had close personal ties. Respondents' feelings toward others were thus the criterion by which a person was or was not named as belonging to the network. Respondents wrote down the first names or initials of the persons they had named on a list. This list specified 18 relational categories, e.g. "parent," "child," "partner," "friend," "colleague" (see Table 1). Second, if nine or more persons had been put on the list, the respondent was asked to circle the names of the eight persons on the list with whom he or she had the closest ties? Questions were then asked about each of a maximum of eight persons and the respondent's relationship with them. Ten questions were about the positive, emotional, and instrumental aspects of the content of each relationship (see Appendix, questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 14), three about negative aspects (questions 3, 7, and 11), one about the degree of intimacy (question 8), and one about the intensity of support (question 15).

Procedure

First, it is necessary to determine whether the primary relationships share a common core. A meaningful comparison of an operationalization on the basis of relationship

Table 1: Types of Close Relationships on the List on Which Respondents Wrote Down the First Names or Initials.

Types on the List	N ^a	Intimacy ^b	Rank ^b	H ^c	Rho ^d
Parents	282	3.14 (.75)	3	.33	.76
Mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law	114	2.88 (.58)	8	.30	.72
Children (incl. foster- and step-)	572	3.34 (.66)	2	.33	.74
Daughters-in-law, sons-in-law	118	3.13 (.67)	4	.32	.67
Brothers, sisters	363	2.91 (.70)	6	.36	.77
Brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law	185	2.76 (.71)	9	.33	.74
Other relatives	166	2.91 (.79)	7	.31	.70
Partner	231	3.73 (.54)	1	.35	.73
Ex-partner	10				
Friends	573	3.02 (.74)	5	.34	.76
Acquaintances	86	2.75 (.79)	10	.45	.82
Colleagues, fellow students	95	2.51 (.63)	12	.37	.80
Neighbors	92	2.52 (.72)	11	.45	.80
Children (not one's own)	25				
Correspondence contacts	12				
People of the neighborhood, of the pub, etc.	13				
People you know through clubs or (church) associations	29				
Other important contacts	13				
Total	2987	3.06 (.76)	.38	.79	

a. The number of mentioned persons in answer to the second identification question.

b. *M* (*SD* between parentheses) for intimacy (range 1 - 4) followed by the ranking number.

c. Coefficient of homogeneity of the scale of ten content aspects.

d. Reliability of the scale of ten content aspects.

type with an operationalization on the basis of relationship content can be made only if the relationships have a common core. The answers to the questions about the content of the relationships must be sufficiently homogeneous across the different types of relationships to form a one-dimensional scale. The MOKKEN procedure of scale analysis (Mokken 1971) is used to determine the degree of homogeneity; the coefficient of homogeneity must be at least .30.

Next, the nominal categorization must be transformed into an ordinal categorization. The assumption underlying this procedure is that the type of relationship provides an indication of the location of that relationship on a continuum of support. The answers to question 8 will be used to order the types of relationships according to their average degree of intimacy. Types of relationships that are mentioned infrequently by the respondents will be dropped from the analysis.

With the help of the LISREL program (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1981), a model

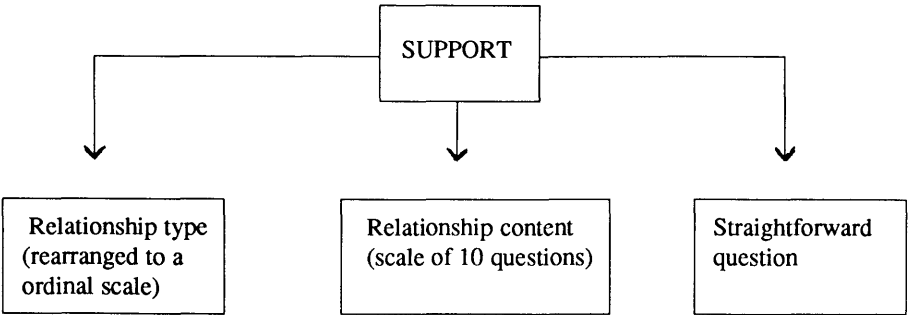
will be tested in which the ordinal scale scores based on the type of relationship, the scores on the scale assessing the positive content of the relationship, and the scores on the straightforward question about support in the relationship will be used as indicators of the latent concept of support (Figure 1).

When the estimate of the parameter of the relationship type is high and the estimate of the parameter of the relationship content is low, we can conclude that questions about the relationship type are necessary and sufficient to determine the intensity of support in a relationship. If the opposite is true, we can conclude that questions about the content of the relationship are sufficient and necessary to determine the intensity of support in a relationship. If both parameters are high, we can conclude that both measures are good indicators of the intensity of the support in a relationship. A choice of one of the two may then depend on other considerations, such as cost effectiveness.

Should neither of the estimates of the parameters be high, we will not only have an indication that the relationship type is an invalid measure but also an indication that certain aspects of support within close relationships are not measured by our questions about the relationship content (cf. Veiel 1985). For example, our questions only minimally and indirectly address esteem support (Cobb 1976) and appraisal support (House 1981; Kahn 1979); the possibility exists that this omission will produce low parameters.

Research units. The LISREL program needs an input of correlations between the variables. The variables in the model are characteristics of the separate *relationships*. On average, the respondents named 7.1 persons. Of the 419 interviewees, 120 named fewer than eight persons with whom they had a close relationship; 299 named the maximum of eight persons in answer to the two identification questions about the close-knit network. Altogether 2,987 persons were named with whom the interviewees had a close relationship. If we enter data on the types of relationships and the content of the relationships into the analysis, we could do so at the level of the separate relationships. However, the data on the separate relationships were not collected independently from each other. In order to compute correlations between the variables *correctly*, we proceeded as follows. At random we picked one relation-

Figure 1: Model of the Operationalization of the Latent Concept “Support”.



ship for each respondent, and computed the correlations for this relationship. the correlations were computed. This process was repeated for each of the eight relationships. Next, we computed the average of the eight correlations for each pair of variables concerning the type and content of the relationships. The average correlations differed only very slightly from the correlations we had computed for all 2,827 relationships of the 419 respondents. (Relationships with missing data were removed from the analysis.) The correlations over the 2,827 relationships were used as input in the LISREL analysis; the *t*-tests of the estimates of parameters were based on 419 (the number of respondents) independent units of observations.

RESULTS

For each of the relationships a sum score was calculated of the responses "often" and "certainly" to the questions about the content (range 0-10). The ten questions formed a unidimensional scale. The homogeneity of this scale was sufficient for each type of relationship and for the total sample (see Table 1). This means that the primary, close relationships of the respondents with persons such as a partner, kin, friends, colleagues, and neighbors are all characterized by the possibility of sharing emotions, and receiving (or giving) advice, practical help, and affection.

The results presented in the fourth column of Table 1 indicate that the relationship types differ in their degree of intimacy. Relationships with a partner have, on average, the highest degree of intimacy (rank number 1, see column 5), followed by relationships with children. Parents are ranked third, followed by daughters- and sons-in-law (fourth), and, somewhat surprisingly, friends ranked as fifth. Brothers- and sisters-in-law, acquaintances, colleagues, and neighbors have, on average, the lowest degree of intimacy. The standard deviation of the intimacy ratings of partnerships is relatively low, indicating that it is the type of relationship that is the most coherent. Note that the differences between the types in their degree of intimacy are small, as a consequence of the identification procedure that asked for *close* relationships.

Next, the parameters of the model of the operationalization of the theoretical concept support were computed. The correlation between the type of relationship and the straightforward question about support is $-.28$ ($p < .001$), and that between the type of relationship and the content is $-.34$ ($p < .001$). The correlation between the content of the relationship and the straightforward question is reasonably high ($.64$) compared to the other correlations.

The model assumes that the type of relationship, the content, and the answers to the straightforward question indicate the intensity of the support within close relationships. The estimates of the parameters of both the straightforward question and the content are high ($.72$ and $.89$, respectively, and for both, $t > 3.29$; the proportion of variance in these variables explained by the latent concept is 52.2% and 78.7% , respectively), a finding that reflects the high correlation between these two measures. The estimate of the parameter of the type of relationship is significant but

weak ($-.38, t > 3.29$); the proportion of variance in this variable explained by the latent concept is 14.5%.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In empirical research into supportive networks as well as in discussions about ways of improving supportive relationships, it is very common to differentiate among kin, friends, and so on. The assumption is that the various types give different kinds of support, or different degrees of support, or both. In our view, the rationale behind distinctions based on relationship types has flaws.

Our results showed that the various types of primary relationships share a common, positive, emotional, and instrumental content. The best indicator of the latent concept of support was found to be the score on the scale concerning the positive, emotional, and instrumental content. Second best was the score for the straightforward question. Furthermore, our findings revealed that the type of relationship gives little information about the intensity of the support in the relationship.

With regard to this conclusion, we would like to make three remarks. First, the tested model assumes a certain communality between the various indicators. The researcher is free to give a label to the latent concept (although in this case the strong association between the latent concept and the straightforward measure of support confirms the choice of the label "support"). We do not want to disregard the possibility that the type of a relationship indicates another kind of support, and that information about the (role) type can add to our knowledge about support within relationships (Rook and Peplau 1982). Second, we do not want to suggest that relationship type has no discriminative potential at all. For instance, knowing that a relationship is with a "partner" or with a "child" gives an indication of the supportive content. Further, if we were to examine all kinds of personal relationships, and not only *close ones*, it is possible that the distinction between, for instance, a "friend" and an "acquaintance" would give information on the intensity of support.

On the basis of the data presented here, we can advise against relationship type as an indicator of the support in that relationship. Fischer (1982) stated that the use of relationship types or labels, should not be abandoned, because they are an important way for people to create order in the social world. But using the relationship type in order to assess the degree of support makes it necessary to have at least a systematic, empirical understanding of the differences between types of relationships (Weiss 1982). The results showed that the use in empirical research of variables such as "number of friends" and "number of kin," is based on a rather casual subset of the set of close relationships. Only after it has been shown what the elements in this subset have in common *and* in what ways this subset is to be distinguished from other subsets will it be useful to distinguish types of relationships and to interpret their meaning with respect, for example, to the intensity of feelings of loneliness. For these reasons, it is better to determine the intensity of the support by identifying the emotional and instrumental content of the relationships.

With respect to the size of the correlation between the content scale and the

score for the straightforward question, we would like to make the following remarks. It is possible that we would have found a stronger association had we used a more suitable criterion variable of support, e.g., one with more answering categories, or a more reliable measuring instrument. It is also possible that we would have found a stronger relation had we drawn into our research quite different content aspects of close relationships. We have already made various suggestions to this end. In spite of those remarks, the correlation between the content measure and the straightforward measure is high enough to conclude that the selected content aspects assess support in a reliable and valid manner.

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